Lusus Naturae

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Lusus Naturae

by The_German_Grim_Reaper

Summary

lusus naturae, noun: an organism exhibiting marked deviation from the norm, a freak of nature.

Having escaped his kidnappers and gotten Jack Crawford arrested, Will Graham has some healing to do. Hannibal suggests torturing one of Will's kidnappers as a way of therapy. Speaking of which, it's about time for the Ripper to go on another sounder...

Notes

The torture isn't as graphic as, say, half of what's written in this fandom. But it's still torture, and there are ants involved near the end, so be warned. This chapter is creepy Marc, but next chapter they'll deal with Claudine Hopper-Lounds!

When I started writing Corte Corbata a couple of weeks ago, I was so careful with it. I was like "my beta must read each chapter at least 3 times before I can even *think* about posting!" and now I'm just like "finished this five minutes ago, haven't proofread it at all, hope it's not too terrible!"

Let me know what you think in the comments!

Marc

Will woke up in a soft bed. A plush white comforter was draped over his body, cocooning him in warmth and softness. This was… unusual, seeing as his own bed in Wolf Trap had an old, flat mattress and no blankets this soft. It was also unusual because the last thing Will remembered, before waking up here that is, was being in the car with Hannibal.

Hannibal. Will surged out of bed, memories of the night before flooding his head. The dinner party. The kidnapping. Framing Jack Crawford.

(*It's not framing*, the Hannibal in his head told him, *if he was guilty in the first place. It's just a matter of making sure they find the right evidence.*)

"Hannibal?" He called.

There was movement in the hallway outside and then Hannibal was there. His feet didn't make a sound, but he smiled when he saw that Will was awake. "Good morning, Will." He said. "Or should I say good afternoon?"

Will squinted at him blearily, relaxing back onto the pillows as the knowledge that he was *safe* sank in. "What time is it?"

"Nearly three. You've been asleep for several hours now, I was starting to worry."

"You could've woken me."

"Nonsense. You needed the rest."

Will rolled his eyes but didn't protest. "Abigail?" He asked hopefully.

Hannibal's smile softened. "She's downstairs." He assured Will. "And before you ask, yes, I've had Alana check on your dogs."

Will nodded, relaxing even further at the affirmation. "And the… the man in the trunk?"

"He's been moved to the basement. He was still unconscious when I put him there, although I expect the drugs I gave him will have worn off by now. I thought you might like to be there when I begin torturing him."

Will thought about it, his brain still sluggish from sleep. Or was it from the concussion? Either way, his brain was sluggish, and it took him a moment to formulate an answer. "I would." He agreed after a long pause. "But can it wait a few days? I don't know if I'm ready to face him yet."

He expected to be embarrassed, admitting that to Hannibal, but the other man only nodded. His hand reached out to brush Will's hair out of his eye. "Of course. Would you like to come downstairs to see Abigail, or should I bring her up here?"

"Downstairs." Will said. "Please."

Hannibal helped him out of bed, giving extra care not to aggravate his injured arm. Once he was on his feet, Will found that he could walk all right, although Hannibal still hovered close by in case of a fall.

"Abigail?" Will called out softly as he made his way down the stairs. It was a slow process and his muscles ached, but he found that he still preferred this to having Hannibal carry him again.

She came to stand at the bottom of the stairs and Will's eyes began to water at the sight of her. Abigail, alive and healthy, whole apart from the thin line on her neck and the missing ear hidden under her hair. He took a step forward too quickly and tripped.

He thought, for a moment, that his face was about to become well-acquainted with the stairs the hard way. At the last second, Hannibal's arms wrapped themselves around his torso and heaved him back to his feet. "Thanks." Will muttered, embarrassed.

He descended the rest of the stairs more slowly, very conscious of the fact that another fall would probably lead to Hannibal carrying him around everywhere for days. When he reached the bottom, he hugged Abigail with his left arm, the right one still dangling limply by his side. It would be another day or two before they put a cast on it, the doctors had told him, they wanted to wait for the swelling to go down.

"I've missed you so much." She whispered, throwing both of her arms around his neck.

"I thought you were dead," Will replied just as softly.

He didn't need to look to know that Hannibal was watching this reunion with a detached sort of pleasure and amusement. He hadn't been lying when he told Will he cared about Abigail, even though Hannibal had an odd way of showing it sometimes. Then again, helping her to fake her death had probably been the best thing he possibly could have done for the girl, even if Will was still upset over having been kept out of the loop.

When Will was released from her hug, he took a step back and gripped the stair railing for support. "Where are we?" He asked.

"My second home." Hannibal supplied, placing a gentle hand to the small of his back and guiding Will into the next room. "In a rather isolated region of Maryland."

"This is where I've been staying since, you know. Minnesota." Abigail added.

Will nodded, opening his mouth to reply, but whatever he had been about to say was lost as he took in the view. He stared in awe at the floor-to-ceiling windows, only a thin pane of glass separating him from the wilderness outside. And… was that a cliff? "Oh my god, Hannibal," he said, his mouth dry.

Hannibal smiled. “This property has belonged to me for many years. A safehouse should anyone ever discover my... preferred hobbies.”

Will nodded. He knew what it meant that Hannibal was showing this to him now. He had Hannibal’s trust, fully and utterly. If the police ever went after Hannibal, Will would know where to find him, and Hannibal trusted him not to tell. (He wouldn’t, of course. He may have had Hannibal’s trust, but Hannibal had his loyalty, and there was very little that could change that.)

“Thank you, Hannibal,” Will said. “For everything.”

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They’d had to go back to Baltimore that night, despite how much Will had wanted to spend time with Abigail. Hannibal had insisted that it would look suspicious if they were unaccounted for so shortly after everything that had happened with Jack, and Will (however grudgingly) had to admit that he was right.

It had been two days since then and Will had yet to visit Abigail again. They had had phone calls- furtive conversations whispered in the dark, frightened of discovery even though there was no one to overhear them- but it wasn’t the same. And after having two days to rest and recuperate- and have an itchy, uncomfortable cast attached to his arm- Will felt that he was ready to go back.

He told Hannibal as much over dinner on the second day. “I want to face him.” He said. “I *need* to face him.”

“Are you certain you’re ready? I understand if you need to take more time.”

“I’m ready.” Will had insisted.

And so here he was, on the morning of the third day, standing in the cliff house kitchen wearing one of Hannibal's clear plastic murder suits. Hannibal had spread out an array of weapons for him to choose from, ranging from the blunt (a large work hammer) to the precise (a tiny medical-grade scalpel).

"Should I be concerned how much of this stuff you have?" Will joked, running his gloved hands over the contents of the briefcase.

Hannibal looked almost offended. "I would never use it on *you*." He insisted. Then he leaned in closer, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Or at least, not unless you wanted me to."

Will mock-scowled at him. "Thanks but no thanks. What's this one?" He asked, picking up what looked like a cross between a scalpel and a knife.

"That type of scalpel is best for creating large incisions through thick areas of the skin." Hannibal answered promptly, barely even having to glance at the blade. "I prefer to work with smaller scalpels, myself, but it's best to be prepared for all situations."

Will hummed in consideration and set the scalpel back down. He didn't have quite the eye for precision that Hannibal did, preferring instead to use larger blades or his hands. *Marc doesn't deserve my hands*, he thought bitterly, and picked up a blade shaped like a crescent moon with a handle on each end. "What about this one?"

"A italian blade. It's traditionally used to finely chop herbs, but I'm sure you could put it to better use."

WIll frowned and put it down. As fun as it might be to experiment with unusual weapons, he wasn't sure that he was ready to go so far out of his element. That could wait for later, with a less personal victim. For now, he needed to be as comfortable as possible, and that included his choice of weapon.

Will reached for a more familiar blade- a large knife, the kind he would use to gut a fish.

Hannibal smiled, too, looking pleased with the choice. Will could see why; it might not be as fancy as the knives Hannibal preferred to use, but it was so distinctly *Will*, and Hannibal had always encouraged Will to embrace his true nature.

He looked over to Abigail, who was hovering on the edge of the kitchen nervously. "Did you want to come?" Hannibal asked her politely.

She shook her head. "No, I, uh... this seems like a personal thing. I just… are you okay?"

Will gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "I will be."

And with that, he followed Hannibal into the depths of the basement below.

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Their guest was awake when they got there. He was strapped to a surgical table, naked as the day he was born, thick restraints attached to his wrists and ankles and a catheter tube hooked up to his extremities. His face was pale, his wrists chafed red from trying to pull free. Will dimly wondered if Hannibal had bothered to feed him while they were gone, then decided that it didn't matter.

The room was brightly lit, the walls and floor a sleek steel-gray. There were grates in the floor- to drain the blood?- and a line of meat hooks hanging from the ceiling. The way Marc was positioned allowed him to see neither. Still, he seemed to have worked up a nervous sweat by the time Will came to stand in front of him.

"Let me go." He grunted, glaring up at Will from his position on the table.

Will scoffed. "And why would I do that? *You* didn't seem very keen on letting *me* go when our positions were reversed."

"Yeah, well we didn't fucking leave you tied to a table for three days with a fucking tube stuck in you!"

"No." Will agreed quietly. "You had other ideas of what you wanted to do with me. Isn't that right, Marc?"

Marc was silent.

"That is your name, isn't it? Marc. See, the thing is, Marc, I tried to warn you." Will said, still in that eerily-calm voice. He pulled a stool out from under the table as he spoke, letting the blade in his hand glint in the doctor's-office lighting. "I really did. But you just didn't want to listen, did you?"

Marc swallowed, visibly nervous now. "You can't do this to me." He protested. "You're with the FBI."

Will smiled, then, and it must have been terrifying because Marc's face managed to pale even further. Behind him, yet unnoticed by their prey, Hannibal was gazing at Will like he was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. "Good." Will practically purred, turning his attention back to the man on the table. "You remember. And do you remember what else I told you, right after that?"

Marc shook his head. Will's smile widened and the man let out a whimper of fear.

"I said," Will told him, leaning in closer, "that some of the serial killers I hunt would be *very upset* to find out I was missing. Hannibal?"

Hannibal, upon being addressed, moved to come stand beside Will. His body language was cold, looking down at Marc as though he were no more than a bug under his shoe. "Good

afternoon." He greeted Marc with faux politeness. "My name is Dr Hannibal Lecter. You see, Will here is my partner in both senses of the word, and I find it *very* rude for a low-level thug such as yourself to take him. To put your hands on what's *mine*."

Marc shivered. Will picked up the fishing knife again and flipped it idly in his hands, noticing the way Marc's eyes caught on the glint of the metal. Will smirked.

"I- I don't know what kind of bullshit intimidation tactic this is," he stammered desperately, "but it's not going to work."

"See, my partner here is a *very* good surgeon." Will explained, not looking at Marc but instead at the knife he was still twirling in his hands. "And a chef, and a psychiatrist, but really it's the surgical experience that matters here. He knows *exactly* where we can cut you to make it hurt the most, and *exactly* how to stitch you up so you won't bleed out. And then there's the serial killer thing, so rest assured they won't be finding your body until *we* decide we want them to."

Marc looked terrified, and Will relished the feeling of fear on his face. *He, more than anyone else,* deserves *this*. "You wouldn't." He didn't sound like he believed his own words. "You- you can't."

Hannibal and Will were silent.

"What, just cause you've stabbed a couple people in back allies, you think you have what it takes to kill me? I've got friends, allies, they'll come after you."

Will scoffed. "Friends? If you mean those thugs in the warehouse, you're out of luck. They're dead."

"A couple of people?" Hannibal asked, looking rather offended. "Back alleys? That's just rude."

“Calm down, Hannibal.” Will chided him, an amused smile twisting over his lips. “He doesn’t know who you are, yet. I’m sure he would understand if he did.”

Hannibal sighed with mock contrition. “My apologies. I’ve failed to properly introduce myself. My name *is* Dr Hannibal Lecter, as I said previously- but you most likely know me by my other name.”

Marc swallowed nervously, but he took the bait. “Your other name?”

Hannibal smiled coldly, leaning in close. “You may know me,” He whispered, “as the Chesapeake Ripper.”

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Will and Hannibal emerged from the basement a little less than an hour later. They shed their plastic suits at the top of the stairs, careful not to let any blood get on the main floor of the house. Abigail was waiting for them, looking unimpressed.

“Either you two are very bad at torturing,” she said, “or this house has better soundproofing than I thought.”

Will laughed, but Hannibal was the one to reply. “I assure you, it’s the soundproofing.” He told her, lips quirking up in an almost-smile.

“Although we *did* have to gag him after a while.” Will added, considering. “Damn near bit out his own tongue before we stopped him.”

Hannibal sighed, then, at Will’s coarse language. Will shot him a teasing smile and Hannibal rolled his eyes fondly.

“What did you do to him?” Abigail asked, drawing their attention back to her. “Or, more accurately… what did *he* do to *you*?”

Will went still. Hannibal put his hand on his shoulder, a comforting gesture, and Will couldn’t help but lean into it. “I don’t want to talk about it.” He told Abigail.

She nodded, looking chastised. “Sorry.” She said. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No harm done.” Hannibal assured her. “You may go down to the basement if you’d like to see for yourself, although I am sure you will see it soon enough when you bring him his dinner.”

She nodded again. “Okay. Do you want me to help cook, or…?”

Will didn’t reply; the kitchen was Hannibal’s domain, after all. And it wasn’t like they were going to be cooking the meat they had just butchered. Although he had no qualms with cannibalism in general- as proven by Randall Tier, Freddie Lounds, and every other dinner he’d eaten with Hannibal since finding out- Marc wasn’t fit to feed a pig, much less a human. And besides, the particular… *part* they had lopped off wasn’t exactly good eating.

Hannibal considered it. “No, I don’t think so.” He said after a moment. “I’ll get started on dinner- why don’t you show Will around the property?”

Abigail brightened up at that, and Will let her drag him off to explore the grounds.

***

The next time they visited Abigail, it was after she’d met Cassie.

Will and Hannibal had gone on a mini-vacation to Paris. Well, Will didn't think there was anything *mini* about it, but Hannibal seemed to feel that three days in a foreign country was not enough to constitute a full-on vacation. ("It's not a vacation unless it's at least six days, Will, shouldn't you know this?")

Will hadn't been there when Abby called, but Hannibal had filled him in after the fact. Not only had Marc nearly escaped- breaking his thumbs to get out from the restraints- but Abigail had, in her quest to sedate him, revealed herself to a civilian and put their entire freedom in jeopardy. Granted, the civilian was Cassie Hopper-Lounds, and Will was fairly certain she was trustworthy even if she *did* figure out Abigail's true identity, but…

"We'll have to finish up with our guest sooner rather than we had anticipated." Hannibal told Will as they drove up the driveway to the cliff house. Their flight had returned that morning, and they were going straight to see Abigail. "We cannot risk another incident."

Will nodded in understanding. "I don't… I might need your help to do it." He admitted. "As… *therapeutic*… as our last visit was, I don't know if I can handle doing it like that again."

Hannibal frowned. "You seemed perfectly at ease when last we visited."

Will shrugged, feeling a little bit sheepish. "I may have been borrowing your mindset, a bit. It's easier that way. But if we're going to kill him, I want to do it as myself, and that's going to be more difficult."

"You were fully yourself when you killed Randall Tier. And Freddie Lounds."

"Yeah," Will huffed sardonically, "but *Freddie Lounds* didn't try to rape me."

Hannibal was silent for a long moment. He didn't speak until he had parked the car and they were halfway to the door. "Yes, I see how that would make a difference. But I believe in you, Will, and I will be beside you every step of the way."

“I can’t even *think* about him without feeling like there are ants crawling under my skin. I don’t…”

“Will.” Hannibal said firmly, turning to face him and putting both hands on his shoulders. “You can do this. I will be there to help you should you need it, but I will not take this victory away from you. Only by slaying the beast yourself will you be able to find closure.”

Will sighed, but nodded. “All right. Can we display him, like you do when you’re the Ripper?”

A slow smile spread across Hannibal’s face. “My dear Will,” he breathed, “I thought you’d never ask.”

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They didn’t end up killing him that day. Still, Will figured that the missing leg and stolen lung would be more than enough to keep Marc from making another escape. Then there was the dinner party, and of course that took up some of their attention as well. Will and Hannibal returned to the cliff house about a week before Christmas, this time with a plan.

“Are you sure the ants will be active?” Will asked, lugging Marc feet-first towards the car. Hannibal, who was supporting the man’s head and shoulders, raised an eyebrow.

“Are you really doubting me? Need I remind you, I have much more experience with this than you do.”

Will sighed, reaching the back of the car and hefting the man into the trunk. “I’m just worried. I want everything to be perfect.”

“And it will be.” Hannibal assured him. “It’s been an unseasonably warm week, so the ants will be plenty active for what we need.”

Will nodded. “Good. That’s good.” Their prisoner secured, he opened the door and climbed into the passenger seat of Hannibal’s Bentley.

Most of the drive was made in silence that was only broken by the quiet music playing from Hannibal’s radio. They had selected a location nearly as far south as Richmond- fire ants were more prevalent in the south, after all- so it took several hours to drive there. It was a Saturday morning, so neither of them had work, and they had arranged an alibi with Margot Verger.

They pulled into the abandoned parking lot at 8:06 AM. It had been early when they’d left the cliff house- not even light outside- but that was necessary if they didn’t want to be seen. This location was secluded, a dilapidated old gas station that had been out of service for nearly a decade. There were more cracks than actual pavement and the edges of the lot were dotted with huge mounds of fire ants.

It lacked some of the symbolism of Hannibal’s usual tableaus, but they had been a bit short on options. Fire ants weren’t *common* even this far south, but they hadn’t been willing to go any further outside of the Ripper’s usual hunting grounds. This place would do the job, even if it didn’t quite have the twisted irony that some of Hannibal’s past kills had.

“Where do you want to put him?” Will asked, surveying the lot critically.

Hannibal considered it. “Those mounds look promising. Would you begin skinning the hands while I get us set up?”

WIll smiled. “Gladly.”

He’d gotten plenty of practice from skinning Randall Tier, although hands did seem to be slightly more difficult to work with than the more fleshy parts of the body. Still, this had been the tableau they had decided on, and he was going to stick with it.

“Sorry, Marc.” He grimaced, opening up the trunk. Marc seemed to be either asleep or unconscious- either one was possible, seeing as he was still very weak from his lung and leg- but he woke up the moment Will’s knife slipped under his flesh. His eyes flew open, wide with terror and pain.

Will made quick work of the hands, removing the skin quickly and efficiently. He did his work still inside of the trunk, which was lined with plastic sheets, so as to not create a mess of the tableau. Marc passed out again after only a few minutes. When Will was done, he looked up to see that Hannibal was watching him with pride.

“Beautiful.” Hannibal said simply, but he wasn’t looking at the body. He was looking at Will’s face, cheek smudged with blood from where he’d accidentally touched it.

Will flushed under the attention. “Shut up,” he said.

Hannibal just smiled. “Are you all done with the hands?” He queried.

Will nodded. “I think I should leave the stomach part to you, though. They might start to question it if I nick an organ or something.”

“Of course.” Hannibal took the scalpel from Will and drew a thin, precise line down Marc’s stomach. Blood welled up, despite how much he had lost already. “Help me carry him?”

Will nodded, and together they scooped Marc’s body out of the trunk. The spot Hannibal had chosen was only about twenty feet away, a cluster of three mounds situated fairly close together. They set Marc between them, arranging his body so that each hand was reaching out to touch one mound and the stump of his missing leg was pressed against the third.

“You’ve got the honey?” Will asked.

Hannibal nodded, pulling a small glass vial out of his pocket. Inside was a liquid only *just* too thick to be mistaken as water, but far too thin to be the honey Will had been expecting.

“A dilution of honey in water.” Hannibal explained, catching Will’s confused look. “It will be enough to attract the ants without trapping them.”

Will nodded in understanding and took the vial. He poured some over each of Marc’s skinned hands, some onto the wound in his stomach, and- just for good measure- emptied the last few millimeters onto his eyes. “Now what?” He asked.

“Now,” Hannibal said, “we wake him up.”

He pulled another vial out of his pocket. No, not a vial- a syringe.

“Adrenaline?” Will guessed, and Hannibal nodded.

“Mixed with a paralytic agent, so he won’t be able to disturb our tableau.”

The doctor bent down and pressed the needle into Marc’s neck, injecting him quickly and effortlessly. Will watched with pleasure as Marc’s eyes shot open and he tried to sit up. It only took a few moments for him to start screaming.

“Hush now,” Hannibal chided him. “You’ll want to save your breath. No one is going to hear you.”

Marc did not stop screaming.

Will kept watching him. This had been much easier than he’d been expecting. Then again, having Hannibal by his side the entire time, coupled with the fact that Marc was unconscious (and therefore unable to taunt Will with his voice or his eyes) for most of the procedure, had definitely helped.

“Move in with me,” Hannibal said.

Will blinked, the words wrenching him back into reality. "What?"

"Move in with me." Hannibal repeated. "You've been spending half your time at my home anyway. Let's make it official."

"We've only been dating for less than a month…" Will pointed out, but it was a weak argument. Both he and Hannibal knew that their hearts had been entwined far longer than that.

"I've cared about you since I saw you shoot Garret Jacob Hobbs. I realized I was in love with you when I thought Tobias Budge had killed you. When Jack Crawford had you kidnapped, I thought… we are conjoined, you and I. I don't know if I could survive separation."

Will surprised himself by starting to nod halfway through Hannibal's speech. "Yes, Hannibal." He said. "Of course I'll move in with you. I'll- we can leave the dogs with Abigail, I can sell my house in Wolf Trap- I love you too, murderous tendencies and all."

Hannibal leaned in and kissed him. The moment was broken by another scream from the ground- when had he stopped?- and they broke apart. The ants were making quick work of his body, starved as they must have been by the cold winter months. His hands, which had gotten the worst of it, were almost completely swarmed over. The wound on his stomach was not much better, and there were ants crawling all over him now in search of more honey.

"Time to cut off the hands?" Will suggested, and Hannibal nodded.

Hannibal was the one to do it. He used first a scalpel to separate the skin and muscle, then a bone saw to snap through the fragile wrists. Will had wanted to do it himself, but he had reluctantly agreed that a more experienced hand was needed. It wouldn't do to clue the FBI in that the Ripper had a partner, after all.

Marc was still awake when they finished, although he seemed to have lost all energy to scream. Hannibal and Will packed up quickly and left, knowing someone would find the crime scene within a few hours. They planned to be back in Baltimore by then, solidifying their alibis and enjoying a nice home-cooked meal to get their strength back.

The two of them wouldn't be eating their victim's flesh today, but in that parking lot just outside of Richmond, the ants were having a feast.

The Crime Scene

Will got the phone call four hours later. To his surprise, it was from Alana. "Hey, Will." She greeted him wearily. "We've got a crime scene down in Richmond, local police think it might be the Ripper. Are you all right to join?"

Will frowned. "Am I allowed to? After what happened with Jack…"

Alana sighed. "I know it's a bit unorthodox, but you were never technically taken off the team. Based on the pictures they sent us… it's him, Will. We need you."

He found himself nodding, even though he knew she couldn't see him. "I'll come." He promised. "Just send me the address."

"Okay." There was a long moment of silence in which neither of them hung up. Then her voice sounded again, quieter this time. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry that we haven't been getting along lately. I still don't think resuming your therapy with Hannibal is a good idea, but I understand that it's your decision. Can we try to move past this?"

Will resisted the urge to scoff. That barely even counted as an apology. He wasn't going to kill her- he respected their past friendship far too much for that- but if she genuinely thought they were going to go back to the way things were, she was delusional. Still, it went a long way towards ensuring he didn't feel bad about what he was going to do next.

"Therapy?" He asked brightly. "Oh, you don't have to worry about that. He's not my therapist anymore."

"No?" She sounded surprised, but also relieved. "That's good, Will. I think that was a very smart decision-"

"Actually," he cut her off, still in that overly cheerful tone, "I don't think he was ever technically my therapist. It's not like I was paying him. We just had conversations."

There was a pause. "...but you've stopped having those conversations now, right?"

"Yep!" He gave her a few seconds to enjoy that news before dropping the bombshell. "He thought it would be unprofessional to keep doing that, since we're seeing each other now."

There was the gentle touch of a hand to Will's shoulder and he jumped. Looking up, he saw Hannibal standing behind him, hovering over the armchair and looking down at him with equal parts amusement and affection in his eyes. Will gave him a smile.

"Will?" Alana's voice came through the phone again. "I, uh, think I may have misheard you. Could you repeat that?"

Will leaned back, pressing the back of his head into Hannibal's chest. Ugh, Alana was so *annoying*. "Hannibal and I are seeing each other." He repeated simply.

"Will… I don't think this is a good idea. He was your psychiatrist, he could be taking advantage of you."

Will frowned at that. She had been irritating before, but now she was just crossing the line. "Hannibal is not *taking advantage* of me." He told her sharply. Above him, Hannibal looked offended at the accusation. "And I told you before, he was never officially my psychiatrist."

"He was still acting as one, even unofficially. He could have planted the idea in your mind."

"What, so when *you* want to date him, that's perfectly fine, but the moment anyone *else* gives it a try, he's dangerous and manipulative? Give me a break, Alana."

Hannibal's grip on the back of the chair tightened. Will gave him a small, reassuring smile.

“A month ago you were telling everyone who would listen that he was the Chesapeake Ripper. And now you’re dating him?”

“Yes.” He didn’t feel the need to say anything more than that.

“Will…”

“Actually, is it alright if he tags along to the crime scene? He can stay in the car if that would be a problem. It’s just, I’m at his house right now and my car’s been having engine trouble, so…”

That was a lie. His car had not been having engine trouble at all, but he knew Hannibal wanted to see their crime scene almost as much as he did. And besides, rubbing their newfound relationship in Alana’s face was half the fun. Especially considering she’d been sleeping with Hannibal herself only a few short weeks ago.

“I… all right. Fine. But he stays in the car, you understand? We can’t have a former suspect walking around the crime scene. TattleCrime would have a field day.”

Will rolled his eyes. TattleCrime would not be having a field day, because Freddie Lounds was still missing and her replacement so far seemed hopeless at her new job. And of course, Freddie Lounds would never be coming back to retake her position as resident journalistic bitch. Will had seen to that weeks ago.

“Send me the address. We’ll be there in a few hours.”

With that, he hung up the phone and turned to look at Hannibal.

“Alana?” He asked, although Will was sure he already knew.

“You’d think they’d be keeping a better eye on the BAU after the fiasco with Jack. Inviting two former murder suspects to inspect the crime scene seems… irresponsible.”

“Do you think it’s a trap?”

“No, Kade Prurnell seemed very convinced by our performance. And Alana was genuinely surprised when I invited you along. I think they really are just desperate, and it’s making them sloppy.”

“Without Jack Crawford at their head, your team is out of their depth. I’m sure they will learn how to swim soon enough, but for now, this is working to our advantage. Shall we set off?”

Will considered it. “...we should probably get changed first.” He decided reluctantly. “Alana might have a heart attack if we showed up like this.”

It wasn’t that they were indecent. But both of them were wearing pajamas- even Will, who was long accustomed to wearing only boxers and a t-shirt to bed- and Hannibal had a very visible hickey on his neck. The implication that not only had Will spent the night, but that he did it often enough that Hannibal had bought him his own set of pajamas… yeah, Alana would not be happy.

Hannibal laughed. “Would that really be so bad?”

“I thought we’d decided not to kill her? And anyway, I don’t think it would do your reputation much good. Being seen with a guy like me.” Will teased him, giving Hannibal a wry smile as he stood up from the chair.

Hannibal frowned. “I would be honored to be seen in public with you. But if you insist.”

Will smiled. “Maybe one day. But let’s not show up in our pajamas to a crime scene. I’m not sure they’d invite us back.”

And that, well, that would be very disappointing. As Will had learned with Randall Tier, visiting one's own crime scenes and waxing poetic about the killer's intentions was *very* rewarding. He would hate to lose the opportunity.

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They pulled up to the crime scene in Hannibal's Bentley. He parked in the same spot he had before, only just on the outside of the caution tape. Will could see Alana standing near the edge of the police line, but she turned and made her way over to them as they parked.

"Enjoy yourself." Hannibal said, pressing a quick kiss to Will's lips. He leaned into it, but when Hannibal pulled away after only a few seconds he scowled.

"Now, that was just cruel." He chided.

Hannibal smiled. "I'm sure I have no idea what you mean."

Will rolled his eyes as he unbuckled his seatbelt and reached for the door handle. "Sure you don't."

Despite how much Hannibal had pushed in the early stages of their friendship, he had really taken a step back and allowed Will to take the lead now that they had started dating. Sure, he'd been the one to ask Will to move in earlier that morning, but he almost never initiated kisses or anything of the sort. From what Will could tell, it wasn't that Hannibal didn't *want* to kiss him- quite the opposite, in fact. But he was being very mindful of Will's recent trauma and clearly didn't want to do anything that would make him uncomfortable. Will appreciated the thoughtfulness.

The fact that the one time he'd chosen to initiate a kiss, it had been directly in front of Alana… yeah, he'd definitely done that on purpose. Will honestly didn't mind. He enjoyed irritating Alana just as much as Hannibal did. *If she didn't want to be jealous, she shouldn't*

have led me on for months when I was 'too unstable to date' and then turned to Hannibal the moment she thought I'd snapped.

Will closed the car door firmly behind him and turned to face Alana. "Hey. Nice to see you again."

It wasn't nice.

Alana pursed her lips. "You too." She lied. "The body is over this way."

"I can tell." Even if he hadn't remembered where he'd placed it, or noticed where the forensic techs were all gathered in a circle, Will would have been able to find the body based solely on smell. It was, as Hannibal had said, an unseasonably warm week; a dead body left in direct sunlight on hard pavement could hardly be expected to remain fresh.

"We think it was placed here sometime this morning. Forensics estimate the time of death was sometime between seven and nine. I'm just gonna warn you, it's… pretty gruesome. Even for the Ripper."

Will followed Alana over to the body as she spoke. She was right that it wasn't quite the same as Hannibal's usual tableaus. The usual irony was all there, it was just that the FBI didn't have the context needed to understand it. They didn't know that Marc was a rapist who had gone after someone the Ripper cared about; if they did, the symbolism of 'ants under his skin' would have made a lot more sense. And he didn't deserve to be made beautiful like most of Hannibal's victims were. He was destroyed in death, just as he had destroyed so many others in life.

Marc's body was completely covered in ants. His hands- detached from their wrists and set carefully on top of the ant mounds- were almost fully eaten away. Will could barely see any flesh beneath the mass of insects. "Do we have an ID?" He asked.

Kneeling beside the body, Jimmy Price scoffed. "An ID? Are you kidding me?"

“His face and fingerprints are completely eaten away.” Zeller explained, a little bit less rudely. “We’ll have to wait on a DNA test, and that will take days.”

“From what we can tell, the only internal organ he took was one of the lungs. But as you can see, he’s also missing his right leg and his penis.”

Will nodded. He already knew that, of course. Neither he nor Hannibal had particularly wanted to eat any part of him, but they’d had to remove organs to make it clear this was the Ripper’s work. He’d been feeding the meat to his dogs, instead, along with what little was left of Randall Tier.

“Is it him?” Alana asked, avoiding looking at the mess on the ground and instead focusing on Will.

He nodded. “It’s not as… *clean* as what he usually does, but this is him. Whoever this was, they made him angry.”

“Don’t all his victims?” One of the other agents, whose name Will didn’t know, questioned.

“No. He sees them as lesser, as pigs, but they don’t make him angry. At worst, they’re annoyances. But this… the Ripper was furious, and he wasn’t afraid to tell us that. You should be looking at thieves and rapists.”

Alana’s brows furrowed. “Thieves and rapists?” She repeated. “Why?”

“His hands were cut off. It’s symbolic, he… he tried to touch something that wasn’t his, and this was his punishment. Ergo, a thief or a rapist. Since he was also castrated, I’d, uh, I’d put my money on the second option.”

Silence followed his proclamation. Zeller was the first to speak after far too long of a pause. “If the vic’s got a record, maybe we can track the Ripper that way.”

But Will shook his head. "You can try, but I doubt you'll find anything. He's too careful for that. If the victim went after the Ripper personally, he won't have brought it to the police. Most likely, he was caught in the act and dealt with immediately."

"Not *too* immediately." Zeller corrected.

"We've got what looks like a partially healed wound on his chest, one to two weeks old. That's when the lung was removed, so if the Ripper was responsible for that, he's had him at least that long." Price added.

"He's angry." Will said simply. "He always tortures his victims, it's hardly surprising that he took his time to make this one suffer."

Alana sighed. "I hate when you make sense."

"He probably went after someone close to the Ripper." Will continued, turning his attention back to the victim. It was easier than it should have been to pretend, to act like he didn't already know the details of this case intimately.

"A wife or daughter?" Alana suggested, but she didn't sound like she believed it.

"Could be." Will agreed. "Or it could be a neighbor, a patient, the cashier at the grocery store who smiles at him every morning. We're probably never going to find out. It doesn't matter who it was, just that it upset the Ripper and our victim paid the price."

The other agents were nodding like that made sense- which, to be fair, it did, on account of being completely true. But Alana looked doubtful. "Will…" she began slowly.

"Yes?"

“Are you sure about this? There’s nothing wrong with your profile, but maybe you should consider other options.”

He frowned. “Like what?”

“I don’t know, but it just seems like maybe you’re projecting.”

Will stopped. “...projecting?” It took a moment for his mind to process the word, but when it did, he was *seething*. “*Projecting*? What gives you the right? Who gave you access to those files?”

She didn’t even flinch. “I’m the temporary head of the BAU during the investigation into Jack. I had to read your file to clear you for field work.”

She didn’t even sound ashamed. And to not only have read his file, but to wield it against him like this? To bring it up, not in the safety of her office, but at a crime scene in front of nearly a dozen agents that neither of them knew? Will had known she’d grown hard in the past few months, but this was just *cruel*.

“For your information, Dr Bloom, I’m not *projecting*. The evidence is all there. If you don’t like my profile, fine; find someone else to do it. I’m done. I quit.”

He pulled his badge from around his neck and practically shoved it into Alana’s hands. And with that, he turned and stalked away.

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“Rough day?” Hannibal asked as Will got in the car and slammed the door behind him. He looked genuinely concerned and Will felt a flicker of relief that at least *somebody* genuinely cared about his mental wellbeing.

“Drive.” He bit out.

Hannibal frowned. “Will, is everything all-”

“*Drive.”*

Hannibal drove. By Will’s best estimate, they’d made it three or four miles before Hannibal tried to speak to him again.

“What happened back there, Will?” He asked.

Will sighed, rubbing his face with one hand. “Alana happened.” He said simply.

“I saw you hand over your badge. Are things really so bad that you felt the need to quit?” He didn’t sound like he was judging Will or questioning his decision, just curious. Curious, concerned, and... protective?

“Honestly, I was a little bit worried that if I told you what happened while we were still in the parking lot, you’d get out of the car and murder her. Witnesses be damned.”

Hannibal frowned. “You’ve never doubted my self-control before, which leads me to believe that she’s done something spectacularly terrible. What did she do, Will?”

“She…” Will took a deep breath. Saying it would make it real, and also probably take away the last of the protection Alana had against the two of them killing her. Hannibal had allowed her rudeness so far, out of respect for the person she used to be, but this would definitely be the end of that. “I gave her the profile and she accused me of *projecting*.”

Hannibal was silent for a long moment. When he finally did speak, his voice was carefully controlled. "You told her that the victim was most likely a rapist… and she accused you of projecting?"

Will nodded.

"We haven't selected a third victim yet. I don't suppose…?"

"We can't, not after we fought with her so publicly. We'd be the first ones they suspect, and that would ruin everything we managed to do with Jack."

Hannibal sighed, accepting that. "*Projecting*." He repeated. "The evidence was right there. He was castrated, and she accused you of projecting because you suggested a possible sexual motive?"

"Yeah. And she said it in front of everyone, too. I don't even… how did a consulting psychiatrist end up as temporary head of the BAU? That doesn't even make sense."

"She was the first to suggest that Jack was pushing you too far, not long after I put you in the BSHCI. She's a certified psychiatrist who has worked with the BAU before and has a historically good relationship with you. It's a calculated move designed to discourage you from suing."

"Well, it's the worst possible choice they could have made."

"I quite agree. And Alana's name has just found herself at the top of my list, even if I have to wait a few years before acting on it."

"Yeah." Will sighed. It was just a sighing kind of day, apparently. They'd had such a good morning and Alana had managed to ruin it all with one insensitive remark. "Claudine first, then someone from your rolodex, and we can take care of Alana once everybody's forgotten about this."

“The start of another sounder, then.”

“We could wait until October. That should be long enough, right? She could be my birthday present.”

Hannibal smiled at him, the corners of his eyes crinkling up in amusement. “Have I ever told you how beautiful you are when you talk about killing people?”

“Yes. Several times.” That didn’t stop Will from blushing every time, though. They’d been dating for weeks but he still hadn’t gotten used to being complimented like this.

“And yet it never ceases to be true.”

Will frowned as Hannibal turned onto the highway. “We’re going the wrong way.” He pointed out.

“I thought I would treat you to lunch in Richmond, seeing as we’ve driven all this way already. If you would prefer to go home instead, that could also be arranged.”

Home. The word felt so strange as Will turned it over and over in his mind. Did Hannibal mean his home, or Will’s? But of course he’d asked Will earlier that morning to move in with him, so surely he meant his own home. Or would he take them to Wolf Trap, knowing that Will would take comfort in the presence of his dogs? Will didn’t ask.

“Lunch sounds good.” He agreed. “You know I won’t be able to consult on crime scenes anymore, right?”

“A delight, to be sure, but not one that would have been worth your suffering at the hands of Alana.”

“But it’s not just about the fun of it. It was an advanced warning system. We could control what they think, know if they were getting too close to the truth and steer them away. We’ve lost that now. God, maybe I shouldn’t have quit.”

“I managed for years without that advantage, Will, and I can do it again. Your mental health is much more important than our connections with the FBI.”

Will sighed. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right. I would never have been able to work like that.”

“I usually am. Have you had any more thoughts about how you’d like Mrs Hopper-Lounds to be displayed?”

Will shook his head. “I think I’ll leave that one up to you. When would be best to do it?”

Hannibal hummed in consideration. “I was thinking of Christmas Eve. From what Cassie has told me, her mother usually stays home and drinks over the holidays, so we won’t have to worry about witnesses. Abigail can distract the girls, of course.”

“Disrupt everyone’s holidays.” Will laughed. “Nice. Alana won’t be pleased about that.”

“Nor should she be. Of course, such timing would also disrupt our own holiday; when her body is found, we will most likely be questioned as to why Cassie was at our home.”

Will shrugged. “You know that if Cassie is questioned, she’ll mention Abigail.” He said. It wasn’t a question.

“An unfortunate complication, but one I expect we’ll be able to manage.”

Will nodded, then. “Christmas Eve it is, then.”

Only a few more days, and Claudine would get what was coming for her.

Claudine

Chapter Notes

And here we are! The last chapter! Claudine finally gets her reckoning!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The night was cold. They had, apparently, timed Marc's murder rather perfectly, as the next day had brought with it a cold snap and things had only gotten colder from there. It was too dry to snow, but the cold still reached through Will's jacket and made him shiver.

He was hiding in the bushes, peering in through the partly-open curtains as he waited for Hannibal to return. Claudine was alone, as they had anticipated, sitting in a recliner and nursing a too-big glass of wine.

"Ready?" Hannibal asked, voice breathy in Will's ear. Will nodded.

They moved in silence, creeping around to the back door and slipping inside with ease. Hannibal had already picked the lock, so it didn't take them much time at all to get out of the cold and shut the door behind them. Hannibal glanced at Will, and Will jerked his head to indicate a direction.

Following Will's silent instruction, Hannibal crept down the hallway and towards the living room. The house was unfamiliar to them, but Will had gotten a good enough feel for the layout from looking in the windows that he wasn't overly concerned. Sure enough, it only took a few moments for them to reach the entrance to the room where Claudine sat, blissfully unaware of the danger she was in.

Her chair was facing towards them, and her eyes widened as she caught sight of the two strange men standing inside her home. Her fingers slipped and wine sloshed on the armrest of her chair. It took a moment for her to recover her wits.

Hannibal didn't give her that moment. He moved fluidly, gracefully, swiping the wine away with one hand and covering her mouth with the other. The wine spilled, glass shattering as it hit the floor and sending splinters of glass across the carpet. Claudine reached up to pry his hand away, visibly panicked now, but he pulled a syringe out of his pocket with his free hand and plunged it into her neck. It only took a few moments for her to stop struggling and go limp.

Will, still standing in the entranceway, smiled as he watched Hannibal in his element. Hannibal flashed him a smirk as he easily scooped up the unconscious body and turned towards Will. "Upstairs?" He questioned.

Will considered it for a moment before shaking his head. "The bathroom down here will do just as well. Did you bring the hair dye from the car?"

It was a useless question. Of course Hannibal had the hair dye; he was a professional at this and wouldn't forget such an obvious detail. Still, Will felt the need to check and was reassured when Hannibal nodded simply.

They wanted to kill Claudine. They really, really did. But the fact of the matter was, Alana had been at that disastrous dinner party where Hannibal had lost his temper. If Claudine was killed by the Ripper now, Will didn't think she'd hesitate to point the finger at them. They couldn't leave her alive, though, so he and Hannibal had devised a deceptively simple plan: dye her hair red and display the body as though she were Freddie Lounds.

Obviously, no one would be fooled for long. They did look startlingly alike, but Claudine Hopper-Lounds was visibly five or six years older than her sister, and dental records or a fingerprint match would confirm her true identity. But by punishing her for her sister's sins, as it were, they would direct the BAU to look in the wrong direction for the culprit. It would appear as though the Chesapeake Ripper, his original plans thwarted by Lounds's disappearance some weeks ago, had used her sister as a stand-in. Of course, Will and Hannibal also had a known dislike for the insipid reporter, but she had offended so many criminals (and law-abiding citizens) in her career that suspicion would pass them by. After all, after the affair with Jack Crawford, the FBI owed them. They would never dare to consider that Will and Hannibal might be guilty when there were so many other possible suspects. Claudine, whose bad attributes were much less publicized, would have a smaller subject pool and therefore more risk involved.

“I’ll handle the dye, *mylimasis*, if you would pour me a glass of wine?”

Will frowned, but turned and headed for the kitchen anyway. “I wouldn’t have thought her selection would have anything of interest to you.” He said as he moved down the hallway.

He couldn’t see his expression, but he liked to imagine that Hannibal was smiling as he replied. “No, but it will set a scene. Pour just one glass, with just enough wine to swirl around and coat the glass. And I’m sure I don’t have to remind you to be careful of fingerprints.”

“Of course not. I might not have as much experience with this as you, but I’m not an *amateur*.” If he hadn’t known Hannibal was teasing, Will would have felt insulted. He’d worked as a cop for several years, then taught at the FBI academy for several more, and that was before being recruited to the BAU. Even though he only had a few kills under his belt, he certainly knew how to avoid getting caught.

He followed Hannibal’s instructions to the letter, grabbing the uncorked wine bottle with a rag from the sink and pouring a small glass. He swirled it around as he walked back towards Hannibal. “Now what?”

“Now you can either drink it or pour it out in the sink. Leave the empty glass on one of the end tables in the living room across from where she was sitting.”

Ah. So that was his goal. Making it look like the Ripper had sat down with Claudine and enjoyed a nice glass of wine before making his move. That would certainly confuse the BAU if they *did* come to suspect Hannibal again; everyone knew how expensive his tastes ran, and they would never believe that he would drink something so foul as whatever dollar-store brand Will was currently carrying. And one glass of wine, plus the one Claudine had shattered, meant that the Ripper was working alone. It would be rude not to pour a glass for his accomplice, after all, which would further lead them astray. Just another misdirection to wash away any lingering suspicions.

As Will walked down the hallway, his eyes caught on the photographs on the wall. There were several garish modern art pieces, a few scenic photos, and one picture of what appeared to be Freddie Lounds at her college graduation. She had the same red hair and curls in the photo as she had when Will had known her, so he was certain it wasn’t her sister in the picture. There were no photos of Claudine or the girls anywhere to be seen.

“...Hannibal?” He asked. “Is this Freddie’s house?”

Although the bathroom was further down the hallway yet, he could hear Hannibal’s response clearly through the walls. “Yes.” He sounded rather amused. “Claudine and her children live in Washington DC, although I believe they’ve decided to house-sit for poor Freddie until the end of winter vacation.”

Using her sister’s disappearance as an excuse to upgrade houses for a few weeks was… well, it was astonishingly rude, but not at all surprising considering how Claudine had acted when they’d met. Still, it was convenient for Will and Hannibal, as Freddie’s house was much closer to their own than Claudine’s would seem to be. Not only did that make it easier to commit murders, but it also allowed Cassie and Gene to come and go from Hannibal’s house as they pleased, which greatly pleased both Abigail and her surrogate fathers. Will pushed the thought from his mind, reminding himself that it was the least of Claudine’s transgressions and she would be paying the price later on tonight.

He still had to deal with the glass of wine in his hand. Will certainly didn’t want to drink it- he’d never been a big fan of wine, although he had developed an appreciation for the fancier stuff Hannibal served- but he didn’t particularly want to pour it out, either. He considered it for a long moment before taking the final few steps back to the bathroom. Hannibal’s hands were in Claudine’s hair, massaging her scalp with a formula that looked more gray than ginger. Will flicked his wrist almost lazily, splashing the dregs of wine across the unconscious woman’s face.

Hannibal’s mouth crooked up in a smile. “Cruel boy. That is going to sting when she tries to open her eyes later.”

Will laughed. “We’re going to cut her open and steal her organs, Hannibal, I hardly think a bit of wine in her eye is going to make a difference.”

Hannibal sighed in false exasperation, but Will could see the spark of amusement in his eyes. “Now that you’ve brought that in here anyway, you may as well leave it by the bathtub. Let them think I was drinking it as I dyed.”

“Mmm. And how long is that dye supposed to take?”

Hannibal checked his watch through the thick plastic of his sleeve. “Thirty minutes, now that I’ve finished the first application.”

“And what are we supposed to do until then?” There wasn’t any hidden intent to his words. Will just didn’t feel like standing in the door to the bathroom for the next half an hour with nothing to do.

“I would offer to let you start cutting her, but that’s best saved for a more controlled location.” Hannibal mused. “Have you given any more thought as to who our next victim will be?”

Three. The Ripper always killed in sounders of three; they only needed one more body to round it out. But going after Alana was far too risky a move, and Will didn’t have anyone else that he had a personal vendetta against. There was always Chilton, of course, who had now been exonerated due to the Ripper’s newest kills, but that would be too obvious a choice.

“Hannibal,” Will said, a thought occurring to him that had been bothering him for some time.

“Yes?”

“Why did you frame Frederick Chilton if you weren’t going to stop being the Ripper? You must have known he’d be exonerated.”

Hannibal was silent for only a moment, but Will could see him mulling the question over in his mind. “When I framed Frederick,” he said slowly, “I was not yet sure where your true loyalties would lie. I thought it prudent to distance myself from the Ripper for my own safety following your accusations.”

“And now that you know I’m with you, it was safe to bring the Ripper out to play.” Will summarized.

Hannibal smiled, flashing his teeth. “Exactly.”

And god*damn* if that smile didn’t do things to Will’s libido. He and Hannibal hadn’t done anything more than kiss- both of them too wary of triggering Will’s memories of the warehouse- but Will was fairly certain he was ready to move forward. Still, this probably wasn’t the best place to make such a move, especially since they needed to be so careful of leaving DNA evidence behind.

Hannibal’s smile widened and Will shifted uncomfortably, sure that the other man had somehow noticed how he was affected. He fought back a blush and quickly tried to change the subject. “Someone not connected to you, for starters,” he said, referring back to Hannibal’s previous question. “I’m sure you’ve got someone already picked out in that rolodex of yours.”

Hannibal nodded, acquiescing. “I do have a few people in mind.” He admitted. “But I would never choose someone without seeking your opinion first. I’d like you to make the final decision this time.”

Without seeking your opinion first. Will’s brain echoed the words. On the surface, the words were a kindness, but he knew better than that. “You won’t choose anyone unless I *agree* to it.” He corrected firmly.

Hannibal’s face betrayed nothing. “Isn’t that what I said?”

“You know that it’s not.”

Hannibal nodded slightly, just the faintest dip of his head that Will wouldn’t have noticed unless he was looking for it. And was that a flicker of pride in his eyes? “I will seek your opinion first, and if your opinion does not align with mine, I will defer to your better judgement.”

Will blinked. That was… more than he'd been expecting. Hannibal didn't even look upset to have made such a concession to him. *Oh*, he realized dimly, *he would have done that all along. He just wanted to see if I would catch it*.

"You're an asshole," he grumbled, but there was no fire behind the words.

"No," Hannibal corrected, looking at Will with fondness in his eyes, "I'm a lovestruck fool."

Will's cheeks suddenly felt warm and he wondered if Hannibal could see him blushing. *That's a silly question. Of course he can*. It was the first time either of them had used the L-word in their relationship, but somehow it felt like a natural progression despite the fact that they'd only been dating for a few weeks. "Yeah, well." He muttered, avoiding eye contact. "That makes two of us."

He didn't need to be looking at Hannibal's face to see his expression. He already knew what Hannibal must look like, eyes bright, not even bothering to hide his smirk. Like the cat that got the canary.

Will couldn't bring himself to mind it.

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They brought Claudine Hopper-Lounds to a church just on the other side of the city. Both Freddie and Claudine had attended church as children, although Freddie had given it up as a teen. The church they had chosen was not the one Claudine attended, however; it was one that Freddie had written an article about while Will had been in the BSHCI.

She had praised the church for their outreach work in the community and condemned a local politician for having raised concerns regarding potential misuse of funds. Of course, it hadn't taken much investigation for Hannibal to prove that the church did, in fact, misuse its funds, and that the politician in question (who had lost her career due to Freddie's inflammatory

article) had genuinely been trying to help. It wasn't Freddie's usual kind of article, but it *was* a particularly rude one that provided a convenient location for a tableau.

"Here, do you think?" Will asked, pausing in front of the pulpit.

Hannibal nodded. "Displayed in front of everyone. Like Jesus on the cross, repenting his sins."

"Repenting her *sister's* sins, as Jesus repented humanity's." Will corrected. Then he frowned. "That's kind of a weird metaphor, actually."

Hannibal did not bother to reply, instead focusing on carrying Claudine's still-limp body towards the pulpit. "She should be waking up any minute." He said, draping her face-up over the pulpit so that her head was tilted back towards the pews. "We should restrain her before she does so."

Will nodded, setting Hannibal's briefcase on the ground and opening it up. Inside, there were fewer weapons than the last time Will had seen it. Only the ones that Hannibal thought they might need tonight remained in the case, the rest hidden away somewhere hard to find. The empty space in the briefcase was taken up by several rolls of camera film.

Film was an unusual material to be tying someone up with, and Will was constantly worried that it would tear. Still, he managed to wind it around her wrist, throat, and ankles, fastening her securely to the pulpit and leaving no room for her comfort. Hannibal surveyed his work, then nodded in satisfaction.

Claudine had started to stir partway through being tied up, but she still wasn't fully awake when Will finished. Not wanting to wait for the sedative to wear off naturally, Hannibal pulled out another syringe and gave her a small dose of adrenaline. Her eyes fluttered open with a groan.

"How are you feeling, Claudine?" Hannibal asked her politely, as though he was not a serial killer who had just drugged and kidnapped her.

“I… what’s happening? Where am I?” Her voice was slurred from the combination of drugs, but she seemed to be regaining awareness fairly quickly.

“Don’t worry about that.” Will told her softly. “Just stay still and try to relax, okay?”

“I- I don’t- who *are* you people?”

Behind Will, Hannibal pulled a scalpel out of the briefcase. Claudine’s eyes widened and she began struggling to get away in earnest, but the makeshift ties did their job well. Or maybe her system was just weakened from the sedative; either way, she was trapped.

“What do you want to take first?” Will asked Hannibal. He didn’t particularly need to know the answer, having already discussed which organs they’d be stealing tonight, but he needed to make sure Claudine understood what was going on here.

Hannibal hummed in false consideration. “I had considered her heart,” he lied, “but I’m not sure she has one. Her liver will be tainted from so many years of alcohol abuse. I think her intestines would be a good choice. They would make a lovely sausage.”

Claudine swallowed, visibly terrified. Tears of pain and fear ran down her cheeks as she rubbed her wrists raw against the camera film.

“Fitting, seeing as she’s a gutless coward.” Will agreed. “And those dumpling things you made from her sister, what were those called? We should make those again, they were good.”

Even as panicked as Claudine already was, there was no way she could miss the reference to her sister. Her breath caught at the insinuation.

“Mongolian *buuz*. And yes, I can certainly make that again sometime soon. *Buuz* traditionally makes use of tougher meat like mutton or beef, but I’m sure I can find a suitable cut.”

His eyes roved up and down Claudine's body as though he were deciding where to slice first. Which, to be fair, he probably was.

Will pulled out Claudine's own phone from where it had been resting in his pocket. Not the pocket of his normal clothes, of course, but the pocket of his plastic over-suit that Hannibal had gotten for him. This one fit better than the one he'd worn previously- clearly, this one had been designed with Will in mind rather than being one of Hannibal's spares.

He snapped a photo of Claudine, zoomed directly in on her face. Then he opened a new app, typed a few words, and hit *schedule post*. It hadn't been hard to hack into Tattlecrime, according to Hannibal, and now Claudine's terror would be posted for the world to see. Not for another hour, of course. On the off-chance that someone was reading Tattlecrime at this time of night, it wouldn't do for Will and Hannibal to give away their location prematurely. But when they were done, it would be sent out, and for a short time the world would think Freddie Lounds was still alive.

(She really *did* look like Freddie, now that her hair had been styled and dyed. Will had half a mind to ask if Hannibal had gone to cosmetology school but decided he would probably take offense to that.)

"I- you can't do this to me!" She was terrified, crying, her whole face blotchy with color.

"I think," Hannibal said, sounding supremely unimpressed, "you'll find that we can."

"Is it money you want? I can give you money." She offered desperately.

Will rolled his eyes. "What we *want,*" he said drolly, "is to torture you to death."

She sobbed, tears and snot mixing on her cheeks. "Please! I- I have children, they'll be all alone…"

Will snorted, but didn't say anything. It was harder to read Claudine than it was a killer, but he could still read her; she brought up her children only for the possible sympathy they might garner, not out of any real concern for their wellbeing.

"You have a husband." Hannibal pointed out. "Cassiopeia is a legal adult. And if for some reason neither of them can take her, I would be more than willing to adopt Iphigenia myself. I am an upstanding member of the community, after all."

To her credit, Claudine *did* look a little alarmed at the prospect of her daughter being adopted by a serial killer, but Will had no sympathy for her. He and Hannibal had discussed this at length in the time since they had decided to kill the woman. They were confident that they would be able to convince her husband- who spent more time than not abroad on various business trips- to leave Gene with her older sister. Even if not, Gene would surely be happier with her father than her mother, and Cassie would tag along if their father decided to take Gene in.

"Ready to get started?" Hannibal asked, drawing Will back out of his thoughts.

Will nodded. "We might need to gag her." He suggested. "I think her screams might draw the wrong kind of attention." Hannibal's eyes gleamed with anticipation.

"Or we could just remove her vocal cords. It's a relatively simple procedure, provided you aren't concerned with the wounds healing when you're done."

Will grinned. "Then what are we waiting for?"

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When they finished with her, Claudine Hopper-Lounds was a masterpiece. Her body remained draped over the pulpit, held securely by the camera film. Her torso was cleaved open, ribs bent back to expose the empty space within. They'd left her heart, sour as it was sure to be, but taken her lungs and intestines. They ended up with only a small amount of actual *meat*- taken from the front of her split-open torso so as not to mar the tableau- but Hannibal had always had a fondness for offal anyway.

“We should get going.” Hannibal said, taking one last moment to savor the tableau. Will doubted that either he or Hannibal would ever be invited back to a crime scene, whether under Alana’s leadership or whoever came after; still, he couldn’t help but agree with Hannibal that it was probably better for his health that way. He’d just have to drink his fill (metaphorically, of course; he may be a cannibal but he wasn’t a vampire) when they created the scenes, instead.

“The post should have gone out five minutes ago,” Will murmured, checking the time on his wrist.

“Then we must hurry.” Hannibal didn’t sound particularly alarmed that they had overstayed their welcome, but Will couldn’t help but be a little bit nervous.

He followed Hannibal back to the car, both of them stripping out of their plastic suits in the parking lot and folding them into the trunk. As they got into the car, Will spoke.

“That was… fun.” He admitted. “More fun than I expected it to be.”

Hannibal hummed in agreement. “Your first time killing with me that was not tainted by bad memories. I’ve found that my hobbies are much more enjoyable when shared with a partner.”

Will laughed, ducking his head to hide the blush.

Hannibal was quiet for a moment, but Will could feel his warm gaze as he started up the car. After a few moments, he spoke, his voice quieter now. “I’m very glad you chose my side, Will.”

Will smiled, looking up to meet his partner’s eyes. “Yeah.” He said softly. “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Now that this one is finished, I'm going to mark the series as complete. But go ahead and subscribe to it anyway, because it's entirely possible that I'll get inspired to write another oneshot or something! If there's anything else you'd like to see in this universe, please let me know.

What a wild ride of a month! God, did I really write this whole thing in a month? That's got to be the most productive I've been *ever* in my life. Crazy times.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!